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## OPINION

# CIA covert action at what price?

By Stansfield Turner

**C**ONGRESS faces an imminent decision on whether to continue funding the CIA's covert activities in Central America. Over and above the merits and demerits of the actions themselves, the Congress should consider the potential impact of these activities on the CIA's future capabilities. I believe that continuation of what is going on in Central America could seriously damage the agency.

There are two dangers: that Congress may tighten its controls over such activities unduly; and that the CIA, which has rebounded nicely after suffering great criticism following the Church committee's investigation of 1975-76, will be subjected to another buffeting.

Public attitudes toward the CIA are today being colored by such reports as:

- A story in The Christian Science Monitor on May 8 charging that the CIA had helped organize, finance, and train Salvadorean intelligence units that engaged in "death squad" activities.

- A press release by Sen. Jesse Helms a few days later accusing the CIA of covertly contributing funds to the electoral campaign of José Napoleón Duarte for president of El Salvador.

- A May 19 Washington Post story asserting that the CIA attempted to circumvent congressional limitations on covert-action funding for Central America by asking the Saudi Arabians and Israelis to provide the money.

Accurate or not, these reports revive the distorted image of the CIA as a "rogue elephant" which came out of the Church committee.

The CIA should not have forgotten the serious damage that criticism did. Whatever endangers public support for the CIA endangers the CIA.

It should also be of significant concern to the CIA when it and Congress have as sharp differences as they have had in this instance. For example:

- In December 1982 Congress and the CIA were so far apart that Congress passed an unclassified law restricting these supposedly secret activities. With this confirmation of supposedly covert operations, the CIA could hardly continue them with any hope of secrecy.

- Last April the administration was forced to all but confirm that the covert action had been expanded to the mining of Nicaragua's harbors. Sen. Barry Goldwater,

chairman of the Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence, complained bitterly that he had not been adequately informed; CIA Director William Casey apologized.

In this atmosphere Congress will likely legislate more and more stringent rules governing the CIA. It has been tightening its control over CIA covert activities since December of '74. Then the Congress required, through the "Hughes-Ryan Amendment," that the President notify it "in a timely manner" of all covert actions. The Congress was uneasy that "timely" might not be soon enough. In 1980 it rewrote the law making it explicit that the President would notify it *before* the CIA's commencing any covert action in all but the most exceptional circumstances.

What the Congress has been saying to the President and the CIA for 10 years, then, is something like: "We are nervous about possible overuse of covert action. We want you to proceed cautiously, preferably in consultation with us."

The next move by Congress could be to require that the CIA obtain congressional approval for all covert actions, without exception. Such a move could impair the CIA's capability to do covert actions. In my experience several covert actions were highly desirable for the country, but could not have been undertaken if prior notification of the Congress had been required. That is not because Congress is not trustworthy, but because it would be unfair to ask individuals to risk their lives when more than the absolute minimum number of people know what they are doing.

Why has the administration accepted these several risks to our long-term intelligence capabilities? Because it hopes this covert action will be so successful that everyone will cheer and forget the acrimony it has engendered. That might have been the case in the World War II days of the OSS, but not today when the country has created a system of congressional committees on intelligence to act as surrogates for the public in overseeing intelligence activities. It is a system that places restraints on the executive department's use of the intelligence apparatus, but in so doing brings intelligence as close to being part of our normal democratic process of government as the inherent secrecy of intelligence permits.

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